Journal of Social Issues, Vol. 55, No. 3, 1999, pp. 445–472

Prejudice as Group Position: Microfoundations of a Sociological Approach to Racism and Race Relations

Lawrence D. Bobo*
Harvard University

This research integrates and elaborates the basic premises of Blumer's group position theory of prejudice. It does so in order to make explicit, more fully integrated, and empirically pliable the theoretical foundations of a sociological analysis of the nature of racial prejudice. In so doing, the research identifies important areas of agreement between Gordon Allport's approach to prejudice and that of Blumer. Blumer neither provided a full synthetic statement of his several major pieces on prejudice nor pursued sustained empirical research in the area. Hence, the present article (1) identifies the core assumptions of the group position model, (2) summarizes a recent line of empirical work examining claims embedded in the group position approach, (3) specifies how this approach differs from other closely related approaches, and (4) identifies major tasks for future theoretical and empirical work.

> *The practice of racism is not an abstraction; it produces patterns of behavior which involve real people in highly stressful conflicts of interests and expectation.*
>
> —Lincoln, 1996 (pp. 8–9)

*This article is based on an address presented at the Gordon W. Allport Centennial Symposium on Prejudice and Intergroup Relations, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA, October 31, 1997. An earlier version of this article was also delivered as the 24th annual Daniel Katz and Theodore Newcomb Lecture at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI, April 26, 1996. I wish to thank David O. Sears, Jim Sidanius, and Mia Tuan for their comments.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Lawrence D. Bobo, Department of Sociology, Harvard University, William James Hall, 33 Kirkland Street, Cambridge, MA 02138 [e-mail: bobo@wjh.harvard.edu].

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feelings and resentments, Blumer's analysis places perceptions of competition and threat in a racially stratified social setting at the core of racial prejudice.[1]

The Group Position Model

There is an intrinsically collective or group-based dimension to racial prejudice generally, and to modern issues of racial politics in specific. In a five-page essay published in 1958 that has since become a sociological classic, Herbert Blumer (1958a) criticized theories of prejudice that focused narrowly on individual feelings of like and dislike and perceptions of group differences. He proposed that "prejudice" fundamentally inhered in a "sense of group position," with this sense of group position having indissoluble collective properties to it. Prejudice required the recognition and use of racial categories. Individuals had to place themselves and others into different categories. This differentiation of categories, perforce, established a relationship between members of the categories. Ideas and feelings about racial groups of necessity have implications for appropriate relations between members of those groups. One could not have an idea or orientation to Blacks in the United States, for example, without immediately invoking, at least implicitly, the comparison or connection with White Americans. As Blumer put it, "fundamentally racial feelings point to and depend on a positional arrangement of racial groups" (Blumer, 1958a, p. 4). The focus of theory and research should therefore be the collective process of defining racial groups and their statuses.

The group position model of racial prejudice can effectively blend core ideas from orthodox prejudice models with a sociological understanding of group relations. The former directs attention to the social learning of negative feelings and beliefs about racial groups and their members. The latter directs attention to the historical development of group relations and to the collective or group interests that naturally flow from the institutionalization of a racially or ethnically stratified social order. In a manner quite consistent with Allport's call for multilayered analysis, group position theory weds these perspectives by directing attention to a historically emergent and variable set of racialized identities, modes of social organization, group interests, and status expectations.

To be sure, Blumer's objective was to shift analytical attention away from processes internal to the individual while still recognizing that individual racial prejudice was a powerful social force. In this respect, Blumer's argument stands in contradistinction both to the symbolic racism approach (Sears, 1988; Kinder & Sanders, 1996) and to more conventional sociological models of ethnic

[1] Much of the empirical work drawn on to support the group position theory is based on analyses of large-scale sample survey data. On several counts, such an approach would have troubled Blumer (see Blumer, 1969). For a fuller discussion of these epistemological issues see Bobo and Tuan (1996).

antagonism, such as the early work of Edna Bonacich (1972, 1973). The former attempt to develop, at least at the outset, a largely psychological and ideational account of racial politics (Kinder & Sears, 1981; Sears, Hensler, & Speer, 1979). The latter typically seeks to reduce racial conflict to purely objective economic and class-based struggles (Bonacich, 1991). Both models, I believe, develop distorted analyses of racial conflict. To see why this is so I elaborate and extend Blumer's model of group position.

Blumer maintained that racial prejudice was best understood as a general attitude or orientation involving normative ideas about where one's own group should stand in the social order vis-à-vis an outgroup. His main focus of attention was on prejudice among dominant groups' members. It is worth noting that the main concepts and dynamics identified by Blumer may be applied to how members of a subordinate group come to view members of a dominant group. Furthermore, I argue these ideas may also be usefully applied to relations among and between racial minority groups in a multiethnic social setting.

For Blumer, dominant group outlooks exhibit four features. The first feature is a feeling of superiority on the part of dominant group members. The second feature is a belief that the subordinate group is intrinsically different and alien. The third feature involves a sense of proprietary claim over certain rights, statuses, and resources. The fourth feature involves a perception of threat from members of a subordinate group who harbor a desire for a greater share of dominant group members' prerogatives.

Blumer's discussion of feelings of superiority and beliefs that a subordinate group is "alien and different" are familiar notions. These notions can be restated as the orthodox prejudice models' concern with intergroup affect or feelings and with negative stereotyping. The bedrock assumption of the group position model is that dominant group members must make an affectively important distinction between themselves and subordinate group members. This affective distinction is linked to ideas about the traits, capabilities and likely behaviors of subordinate group members.

Yet such group identities and stereotyping fall well short of making prejudice a dynamic social and historical force, according to Blumer. As he explained, "The combination of these two feelings of superiority and of distinctiveness can easily give rise to feelings of aversion and even antipathy. But in themselves they do not form prejudice" (Blumer, 1958a, p. 4). The dynamic factors in prejudice begin with the feeling of proprietary claim or first rights to scarce and socially valued goods and resources. A wide range of claims might be recognized in the sense of group position. Blumer notes such relatively tangible claims such as access to or control of land, property, jobs and businesses, political decision making, educational institutions, and recreational resources. But he also includes claims on such relatively intangible things as positions of prestige and access to "areas of intimacy and privacy" (Blumer, 1958a, p. 4). Thus the sense of group position is a very general

orientation or broad-spectrum understanding on where the dominant group should stand relative to the subordinate group.

These feelings of proprietary claim or ideas about the rights, resources, and statuses dominant group members are duly entitled to enjoy come to have social effect when members of the dominant group are confronted with feelings of perceived threat. The sense of group position is most readily revealed and becomes consequential insofar as dominant group members believe that subordinate group members are encroaching on their rightful prerogatives. It is the conjunction of presumed prior access or claim and perception of threat to such claims that arouses the belief that a subordinate group is "getting out of place":

> The dominant racial group construes the crossing of the line or preparations to cross the line as threats to its status, its power, and its livelihood.
> It thus develops fears, apprehensions, resentments, angers, and bitternesses which become fused into a general feeling of prejudice against the subordinate racial people or peoples. (Blumer, 1955, p. 13)

Herein lies the intrinsically positional nature of racial prejudice. "The source of race prejudice," Blumer argued, "lies in a felt challenge to this sense of group position" (1958a, p. 5).

Several efforts to draw on the group position model exist in the research literature and merit consideration here. On the whole, these efforts face one of two limitations. First, previous research has been restricted to indirect tests of the core mechanisms of racial prejudice identified by Blumer (Wellman, 1977; Smith, 1981; Bobo, 1983). Second, those studies not relying on indirect tests have typically been secondary analyses with less than ideal measures of core concepts and mistakenly reduce the theory to a purely structural-level claim of objective threat (Fossett & Kiecolt, 1989; Quillian, 1995).

There are three features of Blumer's ideas that I believe should be more explicitly incorporated into the group position model than prior research has recognized. The first point concerns the nature and effects of racial identities. The second point concerns the role of affect and emotions in the sense of group position. The third point concerns the pivotal role of interests and interest groups in race relations.

Race as a Fundamental Cleavage

My reading of Blumer's work indicates that he clearly held that *racial identities are quasi-autonomous social forces, ranking with economic and other institutional dynamics in shaping human social organization.* He makes this point most directly in his essay "Industrialization and Race Relations," published in 1965. After reviewing the core features of the process of industrialization and the presumed social effects thereof, Blumer debunks one of the principal claims about the impact of industrialization made by mainstream economists and sociologists (see also Omi &

Winant, 1986; Stone, 1985): namely, that economic forces would inevitably erode the parochial and anachronistic effects of racial ties in ordering social life. For Blumer, early modes of social organization would powerfully constrain and condition the presumed rationalizing force of economic modernization. This would be especially likely to occur where patterns of racial identity, belief, and social organization have been institutionalized. Indeed, accommodation to an established racial order might become economically rational under such conditions. As Blumer explained:

> Rational operation of industrial enterprises which are introduced into a racially ordered society may call for a deferential respect for the canons and sensitivities of that racial order. . . . It is a mistake, accordingly, to assume that the rational motif of industrialism signifies an automatic undermining of a racial order into which industrialism enters. To the contrary, the rational imperative in industrial operations may function to maintain and reinforce the established racial order. (Blumer, 1965a, p. 233)

Blumer thus credited race with a powerful capacity to influence, shape, and condition the economic and class dynamics of a society. He did so, it must be emphasized, without denying the importance of technological, economic, and other historical dynamics (Blumer, 1955). Instead, he avoided the conventional sociological error of reducing race to merely its economic manifestations. In short, racial attachments and racialized modes of social organization have social underpinnings that reach beyond the economic.[2]

Blumer expected that features of the existing racial order would be built into or refashion themselves under new or transforming economic institutions. Minorities would be excluded from important positions, locked into lower level positions, or afforded only highly constrained mobility opportunities in a modern economic order. In part, he expected that those occupying key hiring and managerial ranks would act on the basis of their preexisting orientations or, at least, in response to pressure from workers and customers. The likelihood of doing so would be greatly reinforced by other features of an institutionalized racial order, such as racially segregated communities, racially segregated friendship networks and spheres of informal interaction, and racially homogeneous family units.

At a minimum, from Blumer's perspective, economic transformation alone could not undermine a racial order that had many other social bases and manifestations. Only theories that reduced racial identities to an economic base could advance such a prediction. Rather, a near opposite pattern should obtain where the

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[2] Although seldom stated so directly, it is exactly the quasi-autonomous and permeative effects of social conceptions of race that figured in many early critiques of William Julius Wilson's (1978) "declining significance of race" thesis (see Pettigrew, 1980, 1981; Willie, 1978). Many counterproductive features and limitations of the decade-long "race versus class" debate might have been avoided if sociological analysts of race issues attended to both the social psychological, microsocial aspects of racial phenomena as well as to the social structural, macrosocial aspects.

racial order ultimately asserts itself within the economic sphere. As Blumer argued:

> The intrinsic structural requirements of industrialism need not, contrary to much a priori theorising, force a rearrangement of the relations set by the racial system. We have here, indeed, somewhat of a paradoxical situation in that while industrialization may alter greatly the social order, it may leave the racial system that is embedded in that order essentially intact. (1965a, p. 234)

Since racial attachments are not reducible to economic or material bases, there is neither a logical reason nor a historical basis for expecting otherwise profound economic transformations to erode a racial order.

It is important to stress, however, that none of this amounts to adopting a primordial or essentialist view of racial identities. Blumer was explicit about the socially constructed nature of racial identities. He was equally explicit about the potential for change in a racial order. He argued that change in a racial order would spring from a direct assault on that racial order from largely noneconomic and political forces. "The evidence seems to me," Blumer wrote, "to lead overwhelmingly to the conclusion that such changes do not arise from inner considerations of industrial efficiency. Instead they arise from outside pressure, chiefly political pressures" (1965a, p. 247).

Such a political challenge to the racial order, to a widespread and deeply rooted collective sense of group position, is most likely to take shape "when the process of running definition does not keep abreast of major shifts in the social order" (Blumer, 1958a, p. 7). The breakdown of "running definition" appears to occur when social change that enhances the power resources under direct control of minority groups, or important allies of minority groups, increases without encountering effective dispute and challenge from dominant group members. A lack of effective ongoing protection of a privileged group position may have several sources. One possibility that Blumer recognized was the presence of an opaque, or at least not immediately apparent, connection between significant social trends and the long-term power balance between groups. One example of such a process is the historic demographic shifts of the Black population from South to non-South states and from rural to urban areas that resulted in greater financial resources, political influence, and leadership strength within Black communities (McAdam, 1982; Morris, 1984). A subordinate group's capacity to challenge the dominant group might greatly improve for reasons and in ways not immediately apprehended as a threat to the existing racial order. Likewise, a shift in the interests and needs of major external parties to a set of social relations may work in favor of a subordinated racial group. A case in point is the gradual but decisive change in the federal government's stake in the Jim Crow institutions of the American South in response to Cold War ideological struggles against communism (Franklin & Moss, 1988; Sitkoff, 1981), or the development of biracial unionism in the face of effective use of Blacks as strikebreakers (Wilson, 1978). I will provide just this sort of group

position analysis of major changes in Whites' attitudes toward Blacks in the United States below.

Affect in the Sense of Group Position

Blumer recognized that *racial attachments and the sense of group position have core nonrational or socioemotional elements*. Blumer's theory of group position is sometimes discussed as though he had advanced a purely instrumental argument about the nature of racial prejudice (Almaguer, 1994; Giles & Evans, 1986; Quillian, 1995; Taylor, 1995). The historical origins and tenacity of racial attachments cannot be accounted for in terms of purely rational, material, and structural forces. There is, first and foremost, nothing given or rational about attachment to a particular set of socially constructed racial identities. It would be both incorrect and arguably dangerous to regard such social categories as "Indian or Native American" or "Black" or "White" as intrinsically meaningful. Nature did not create such distinctions and it did not endow them with social significance. Nor did an institutional economic form such as slavery, de novo, create sensitivity to color and cultural differences or to the Black-White divide in the United States (Jordan, 1968), though the slave era profoundly affected it (Fredrickson, 1971; Takaki, 1979). There is a more complex human social and interpretative process at work, a process that involves both individual psychological factors and broader sociohistorical factors. The interplay of such forces has long been the foundational concern of sociological social psychology (House, 1981; Kohn, 1989; Turner, 1988).

Blumer did not seriously explore or theorize the emergence of basic racial categories or attachments. He did note that such identities take shape through a historical process, involve perceived differences in physical appearance and culture, may entail origins in separate ecological locations (Blumer, 1955, pp. 7–8), and are decisively influenced by the initial terms and conditions of contact of different groups (cf. Lieberson, 1961). But the categories that come to assume significance, or more importantly, why any specific racial marker comes to powerfully shape human identity and expectations, was not the focus of Blumer's attention. Instead, he focused on how to understand the functioning of the sense of group position once a set of racial relations had been largely institutionalized.

There are at least two other ways in which a purely objective and instrumental reading of Blumer's argument goes astray. The sense of group position, firstly, is a normative construct. As Blumer explained:

> Sociologically it is not a mere reflection of the objective relations between racial groups. Rather it stands for "what ought to be" rather than for "what is." It is a sense of where the two racial groups *belong*. . . . In its own way, the sense of group position is a norm and imperative—indeed a very powerful one. It guides, incites, cows, and coerces. It should be borne in mind that this sense of group position stands for and involves a fundamental kind of group affiliation for the members of the dominant racial group. (Blumer, 1958a, p. 5)

This normative character to the sense of group position immediately separates it from a purely instrumental basis. The normative dimension is also part of why prejudice is an active, adaptive social force. It is infused with a moral imperative.

Secondly, Blumer explicitly argued that the sense of group position functioned along two important axes. One axis involved the more obvious dimension of domination and oppression, of hierarchical ordering and positioning. A second critical axis, however, involved a dimension of exclusion and inclusion, of socioemotional embrace or recoil. The exclusion and inclusion dimension, again, invokes an affective or emotional basis to the sense of group position. Blumer spoke directly, although briefly, to this point in the original essay. He drew attention to aspects of the sense of proprietary claim that included "certain areas of intimacy and privacy" (Blumer, 1958a, p. 4). He also expressly held that "on the social psychological side [the sense of group position] cannot be equated to a sense of social status as ordinarily conceived, for it refers not merely to vertical positioning but to many other lines of position independent of the vertical dimension" (Blumer, 1958a, p. 5). Even Blumer's discussion of perceptions of threat identified an emotional component. He explained the nature of feelings of threat in the following way:

> Race prejudice is a defensive reaction to such challenging of the sense of group position. It consists of the disturbed feelings, usually of marked hostility, that are thereby aroused. As such, race prejudice is a protective device. It functions, however, shortsightedly, to preserve the integrity and the position of the dominant group. (Blumer, 1958a, p. 5)

Blumer thus expressly recognizes a concern with group integrity, not merely positional status. Challenges to this conception of where the dominant group should stand relative to the subordinate group are experienced as *emotionally* involving and upsetting.

Part of the point is that restrictions imposed on a subordinate group reach beyond the conventional status dimensions defined by position within the economic and political order. Blumer made this point most forcefully in his discussion of "The Future of the Color Line" (1965b). In this essay he spoke directly to the exclusion-inclusion dimension of the sense of group position and applied it to an understanding of the substantial but delimited successes of the Black civil rights movement. In large part, his message was that even profound change in some aspects or dimensions of a racial order, and the sense of group position surrounding it, may not erode other core aspects of the sense of group position. Blumer defined the color line in a fashion that identified the American Black- White divide as an important instance of the functioning of the sense of group position. Blumer suggested that the color line

> is a line which separates Whites from Negroes, assigning to each a different position in the social order and attaching to each position a differential set of rights, privileges, and arenas of action. It defines the approach of each racial group to the other, it limits the degree of access to each other, and it outlines respective modes of conduct toward each other. The color line stems from a collective sense held by Whites that Negroes as a racial group do not qualify for equal status, and that because of their racial difference Negroes have no claim to

> being accepted socially. Thus, the color line expresses and sustains the social position of the two groups along two fundamental dimensions—an axis of dominance and subordination, and an axis of inclusion and exclusion. (Blumer, 1965b, p. 322)

The color line, so understood, involved all of the elements Blumer had incorporated into his theory of group position. It involved an abstract idea about groups in relation to one another. This abstract idea was a shared, collective sense of position, not merely individual feelings of like or dislike. The color line also had implications for many different domains of social interaction and experience. In Blumer's analysis, then, "the sense of group position is the central ingredient of the color line" (Blumer, 1965b, p. 323). He suggested that the color line, like the sense of group position, had many layers or levels. The levels of economic status and political status were themselves complex and multilayered. Thus, for example, the elimination of racial exclusion policies in access to employment hardly meant that Blacks would find an easy route to positions of high pay, authority, and prestige. More importantly, the economic and political dimensions of the racial order neither exhausted the forms of restricted life chances facing Black Americans nor exhausted the factors that undergirded racial prejudice as a social force.

Blumer argued that for this reason the civil rights movement had failed to accomplish a fundamental change in the color line. Reaching into the inner layers of the color line, those layers that involve feelings of exclusivity and the most intimate areas of private life, would first require profound success in peeling back the more public layers of the color line. Blumer was doubtful that this would happen. In particular, he saw grounds to expect ongoing racial strife and discord because of the emerging economic, political, and social isolation of many urban Black communities. That is, he expected that the racial sense of group position would continue to assert itself, even if in a more delimited and fluid way (Blumer, 1955). There had been only partial success in changing the color line in the political and economic spheres. Moreover, how the color line affected the private spheres of community, friends, home, and family ties had not been touched at all.

Conceptually, Blumer thus recognized an "inner citadel of the color line" that involved the exclusion-inclusion dimension of the sense of group position. He held that this inner citadel is "a matter of personal attitude and thus falls inside the area of individual determination" (Blumer, 1965b, p. 335). As such, it would prove unusually resistant to external pressure for change. All of which suggests a socioemotional element to the sense of group position that cannot be regarded as rooted in objective, material, and clearly instrumental needs.

Interests and Group Position

Having sketched the socioemotional component of the sense of group position, it must be stressed that Blumer was keenly aware of the instrumental aspects of racial prejudice. Once a *set of racial inequalities has been institutionalized there*

are meaningful interests that attach to such group positions in a hierarchical and racially stratified social order (Blauner, 1972; Bobo & Kluegel, 1993; Dawson, 1994; Tuch & Hughes, 1996). Thus, to admit of a strong socioemotional dimension to the sense of group position is by no means to mitigate or deny a central place for collective or racial group interests in the dynamics of prejudice. This recognition is a major factor distinguishing group position theory from orthodox prejudice theories. It also accounts for much of the attractiveness of the theory to sociological analysts of race relations (Almaguer, 1994; Fossett & Kiecolt, 1989; Smith, 1981; Wellman, 1977; Wilson, 1973).

On its face, the mere thesis of race prejudice as a sense of group position immediately invokes the imagery of hierarchy, inequality, and oppression. It calls to mind the differing statuses, positions, and interests constituted in a social order divided by race. Indeed, Blumer's emphasis on areas of felt proprietary claim and on perceptions of threat as the central features of racial prejudice, again, raise to a prominent place the stake or interest dominant group members have in a particular racial order. Yet Blumer also spoke directly to the role of interests and of organized interest groups in shaping race relations. In the original essay he identified interests and interest groups as playing a powerful role in the ongoing process of re-creating and defending the sense of group position. Organized segments of racial groups with clear interests may act to influence public discourse and to influence significant political outcomes. To be sure, Blumer regarded the social dialogue that creates and sustains the collective sense of group position as (1) involving abstract collective notions, (2) taking shaping in the sphere of broad public discourse especially around highly salient or "big events" that capture mass attention, and (3) disproportionately shaped by the articulated views of elite social actors. He also saw this discourse about and emergent sense of group position as nonetheless intimately wedded to the actions of interest groups with an instrumental stake in the racial order. Throughout the five articles I take as constituting Blumer's articulation of group position theory there is a consistent thread of concern with interests, at both the individual and collective level, and with power resources.

Blumer called for careful analysis of the configuration of interests and organized power or control resources in studying any situation of racial group relations. Attention to matters of interests and power would serve, Blumer argued, to better identify the sustaining conditions of racial group relations. He was quite blunt about the importance of interests in this regard. "A study of the sustaining conditions in terms of how they function," he wrote, "must necessarily deal with such matters as vested interests, entrenched power, the inertia of institutions, the use of social codes, devices of intimidation, an established opportunity structure, and the responsiveness of office-holders and decision-makers" (1958b, p. 437).

In this respect, the sense of group position involves significant elements of a "realistic group conflict" theory. The theory is expressly concerned with (1) groups who occupy unequal positions in a social order and the interests that attach to those

positions, (2) perceived threats to groups' interests, and (3) resulting meaningful struggles over access to various material and symbolic resources. It is instructive to note that many other students of intergroup attitudes and conflict would concur in this understanding of realistic conflict. For instance, Tajfel argued:

> The conflict for the scarce resources of rank, status, prestige, or winning a contest is "realistic" when it is institutionalized, i.e., when it is explicitly defined as a contest or determined as such by the norms of the situation. (Tajfel, 1982, p. 12)

This is a view shared by Williams (1965) and, to an important degree, Allport (1954) as well. To borrow Allport's own phrase: "All we are saying here is that clashes of interest and values do occur, and that these conflicts are not in themselves instances of prejudice" (1954, p. 229).

The subtle and more significant point, however, is that the melding of group identity, affect, and the interests in most real-world situations of racial stratification make the now conventional dichotomous opposition of "realistic group conflict versus prejudice" empirically nonsensical. From the group position perspective both elements are present. Likewise, Gordon Allport, the premier prejudice theorist, maintained that most instances of intergroup conflict will likely involve both elements. Thus, the current habit of pitting realistic group conflict theory against prejudice as mutually exclusive accounts of modern racial politics is, upon close inspection, distressingly (and distortingly) simplistic (see Bobo, 1988b). As Allport maintained, "Realistic conflict is like a note on an organ. It sets all prejudices that are attuned to it into simultaneous vibration. The listener can scarcely distinguish the pure note from the surrounding jangle" (1954, p. 233). In many concrete group conflict situations, perhaps especially Black-White relations in the United States, there are both affect-laden identities and orientations that are bound up with differential positions and interests.

Measures and Tests of the Sense of Group Position

For the present I separate work attempting to test the group position framework into four domains. First, I consider efforts to develop reliable and valid measures of competitive threat. There is evidence that we can do so and in a manner that adds information not likely to be tapped by other models. Second, I discuss the most ambitious effort I have undertaken to expand the group position model to consider both the views of members of the dominant racial group and views of racial minority group members. This and related efforts also identify asymmetries in the views of dominant and subordinate group members and suggest some unique elements of the Black-White divide in the United States. Third, I discuss the impact of competitive threat on policy attitudes and preferences. Perceptions of competitive threat matter. Fourth, I sketch out an application of the group position framework to theorizing changes in Whites' racial attitudes in the United States.